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On and off their records

A LOOK AT PERFORMERS

Chanson seems caught between passionate, literate legacy and a pop-rock place

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The classic French chanson seemed born to oscillate between the intimately conversational and intensely theatrical. The legacy is great but, alas, rendered obsolete by the ironies of the age of multicultural corporatism. If the recent releases by the new French wave playing at the FrancoFolies (including veterans like Arthur H. and Jane Birkin) are any indication, the chanson is now oscillating between the passionate literate legacy (à la Juliette Gréco) and a pure pop-rock-electro hybrid.

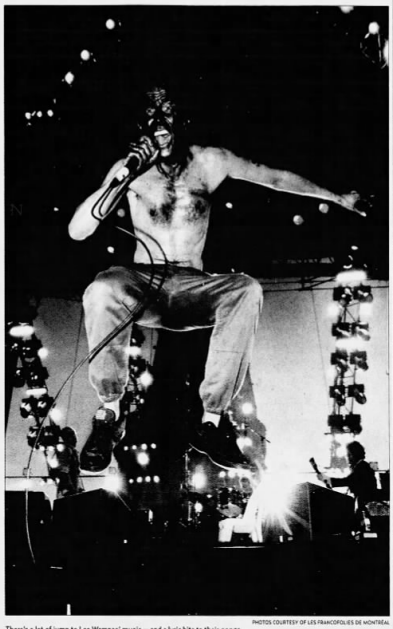
Jane Birkin, Arabesque (EMI): The mannequin who made a flash full-frontal impression in Antonioni's swinging-London film Blowup lives a legacy spelled with two words: Serge Gainsbourg. This album is a long way from the sexual, uh, cooing of Je t'aime– moi non plus that scandalized Europe's hit parade in 1969. As the title coyly suggests, Birkin, now 56, wraps her interpretations of the grand loache Gainsbourg in the keening, mystic sound of Arabic-style pop (and the unique harmonies imparted by violin and oud). Despite a rather arch voice, it's a stunning, mature piece of pop. (Tonight at the Spectrum.)

Les Wampas, Never Trust a Guy Who After Having Been a Punk Is Now Playing Electro (Atmosphériques-Universal): The eighth album in 20 years by hard-slogging "yéyé-punk" rockers with a lyric bite (it's about time someone took a sneer at the beatific world-music star Manu Chao). Just off a 32-date tour of France, this band is primed for sound. Fairly clever, for punk, but not too clever. (Tonight at La Zone Hip Bleue Dry, tomorrow at the Spectrum)

Prohom (Polydor-Universal): Is this mix of fuzz-toned rock and rudimentary electronica a polite, sophomoric version of the Nine Inch Nails or AC/DC he loves? Singer-songwriter Philippe Prohom, tagged as a diehard for "le serpent du rire poseur," repeatedly invokes courage – courage to be cool and stay in town while transcending its bog and muck, courage to lift a finger – with a voice that may sound good in front of a mirror but might come up short in a dark alley. (July 28 at Ford Focus stage, July 29 at the Spectrum)

Alexis HK, Belle Ville (Virgin): His first major-label album is a garnette-inflected jaunt through an imaginary world peopled with odd characters with squirm-worthy personality tics (think Randy Newman crossed with Woody Allen's Zelig). The little instrumental flourishes offer cute, if occasionally cloying, counterpoint to his deadpan storytelling voice. (Tonight at Le Monde Pop le Lait stage, outside Complexe Desjardins)

Dionysos, Western Dans La Neige (Térisa): One of the strangest-sounding bilingual albums by what's described as France's hottest live band. Frenchmen drop acid in America and find themselves somewhere between Sergio Leone and William Burroughs, with a touristic point of view. Produced in Chicago by the legendary Steve Albini, this album spells culture-shock, from deliberately fractured English (à la Surfin' Pong) to absurdist



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LES FRANCOFOLIES DE MONTRÉAL

There's a lot of jump to Les Wampas' music – and a lyric bite to their songs.

French. What's it all about? There's a concept here somewhere, which no doubt spells great anticipation for their concerts. (July 30 at La Zone Hip Bleue Dry, July 31 at the Spectrum)

Arthur H, Négresse Blanche (Polydor-Universal): Anyone who can compare the sight to "une plume d'éléphant" deserves to be made a chevalier of the arts. The son of Jacques Higelin has been with the FrancoFolies since Day One (1980). His cigarette-parched voice, having long lost a battle with outrage, turns out to be the most distinctive of his generation. (Aug. 1 at the Spectrum)

Emilie Simon (Universal): If the 50-year-old teenage success of writer Françoise Sagan is any example, the French have a weakness for the jejune (thank heaven for little girls ... with grown-up minds). Enter the breathy Emilie Simon, whose preciously produced first album has taken Prance by storm (where she's dubbed, equally preciously, "the French Björk"). Having studied modern classical composition, and thoroughly adept on computer, Simon is deathlessly ethereal. It's as if she's loudly whispering entries from her journal straight into your ear through computerized voice treatments (with collaboration from the prestigious sound-architects Ircam at Paris's Centre Pompidou). When she sings "Je voudrais te dessiner dans un desert, le désert de mon coeur," it is sticky sweet threat. Never underestimate the power of intellectualizing adolescent petites pensées. (Aug. 1 at La Zone Hip Bleue Dry; Aug. 2 at the Spectrum)

Jane Birkin's latest is a stunning Arabic-style pop album, a far cry from Je t'aime moi non plus.

Gréco | She loves the stage

CONTINUED FROM D1

"It's funny the reasons I sing. It gives me confidence to go the distance ..." She pauses, adds offhandedly, "Ah, the miracle of distance." And when she concludes, "The stage is my life, my love," all's right with the world. "Maybe I'm in love with what I do."

"Things change, of course," she adds, alluding to a new generation of French singer-songwriters – many at this year's Francos – faced with stacking up against an impossible mythology of la belle chanson, on the one hand, and the anglo-American influence on pop music in general (not to mention 21st-century technology).

"The French language is in good shape. Young people are discovering remarkable new ways of expression. But one thing we do lack is interpreters. I don't believe in 'la relève' (changing of the guard) as a concept. I believe that everyone should be a universe unto themselves. If you bring something, it should be something different." After rol-calling the likes of Montand, Brel, Ferré and Brassens, she quietly says, "You can't be someone else." Especially those immortal names.

"You can't ask a child of 20 and 25, who is maybe too protected or spoiled, to flower immediately. Yet they feel the need to express themselves immediately because that's the world they live in." Gréco had been in prison in the war before she was 16 (her mother was a Resistance fighter), an experience that's a foreign affair to today's music fans.

"I get the impression they're looking for a nostalgia for something. It's curious, sometimes there's a touch of melancholy or sadness when they ask me, 'How was it?' Well, things were much tougher, but also there was more tenderness, more fraternity. You met more people face to face." She lists Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus, Picasso ... "We lived in the cafés, adults spoke with their children. The excuse is that people are too much in a rush to do that today. It's not easy. It's a different world, a more rapid world, a world of ... money."

It's a world where a flashy pop phenomenon like Star-Académie, not some cellar dive on the Left Bank, represents the springboard to fame. "The thirst for money exists, and the hunger for success and fame exists even more than the money, so for a young person it's a big deal when one loses. It's cruel. It exploits people who are still children, there's nothing more fragile than that."

This outwardly calm doyenne of chanson still knows fragility. She can't hide her anxious anticipation of the autumn release of a new album, a collaboration with younger musicians with "many new and strange things musical-by – poetic but frank, like a drum.

"Becoming is always difficult, a struggle between the head and the heart. Everyday I'm different, so I sing differently every day. I'm never the same woman. This one took longer than usual. I'll be relieved when it comes out, if only because it's a little bit of myself that's gone now."

Juliette Gréco performs at Salle Wilfrid Pelletier, Place des Arts at 8 p.m. Tickets are $39 to $69.50, at the festival's main box office at the Spectrum, at Pdesa, or through Admission, (514) 790-1245.

WORTH WATCHING

Toma Sidibé, tonight and tomorrow, 10 p.m., at Le Monde Multiculturel Hydro-Québec, Ste. Catherine St., between St. Urbain and Clark Sts.:

COURTESY OF LES FRANCOFOLIES DE MONTRÉAL

Multilingual Toma Sidibé packs a whole world in his songs.

Born in Ivory Coast, Sidibé moved with his parents to Amiens, France, when he was 6 months old. He learned to play rock drums at 11, before assimilating reggae, rai and African music. At 16, he inaugurated his passport by taking a long trip to Spain, Morocco, Senegal, Burkina Faso, India, Nepal and Mali – adopting the latter as his musical "home."

Back in Paris, he enrolled in the Institute of Oriental Languages to learn Hindi and Bambara, the principal tongue of Mali. He performs in those languages, as well as in French and English, on his album Mali Méo.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

TODAY'S SHOWS AT LES FRANCOFOLIES

FREE SHOWS

4 and 7 p.m. Changó Family Circus, Le Monde Foran.
4 to 11 p.m. Karaoké, Tente Karaoké Le Lait.
5 p.m. The Finalists of Grand Défi Karaoké Le Lait, with Martin Perizzen, Joël Tyrson, Marianne Mathieu, François Duc, Cathy Lapalme and the Marc Sessan Orchestra, Le Monde Pop Le Lait.
6 p.m. Ima, Caire Ford Focus.
7 p.m. Sandrine Colland, Le Monde Tad Desgardins/Radio-Canada.
8 p.m. Les Breastfeeders, La Zone Hip Bleue Dry, Parc des Festivals.
8 p.m. Alexis HK, Le Monde Pop Le Lait.
8 p.m. Toma Sidibé, Le Monde Multiculturel Hydro-Québec, Parc culturel Hydro-Québec.
9 p.m. Norsunt, Le Monde Rad Desgardins/Radio-Canada.
9 and 11 p.m. Mélanie Renaud, Caire Ford Focus.
10 p.m. Les Wampas, La Zone Hip Bleue Dry, Parc des Festivals.
10 p.m. Alexis HK, Le Monde Pop Le Lait.
10 p.m. Toma Sidibé, Le Monde Multiculturel Hydro-Québec, Parc culturel Hydro-Québec.
Midnight: Angelo Cadet, Le Shag, Savoy (Metropolis), 59 Ste. Catherine St. E.

TICKETED SHOWS

7 p.m. Jane Birkin, Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W. Sold out.
7:30 p.m. Michel Rivard, with guest Arsène Moffatt, Cabaret, 2111 St. Laurent Blvd. Cost: $35.50.
8 p.m. Juliette Gréco, Salle Wilfrid Pelletier, Place des Arts. Cost: $39.50 to $69.50.
8:30 p.m. Louise Forestier, Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd. Cost: $25.50.
9 p.m. Jean Leloup Big Band, Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E. Sold out.
10 p.m. Luc De Larochellière, Monument National, 1182 St. Laurent Blvd. Cost: $14.50.
11 p.m. Jeronimo and Virus 3, Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W. $6.50.

FILM

7 p.m. Joséphine, Nacho Kompoj; Épopée, National Film Board, 1564 St. Denis St. Cost: $5 to $7.
9 p.m. La vallée des vertiges, National Film Board, 1564 St. Denis St. Cost: $5 to $7.

OUTDOOR STAGES

L'Aire Ford Focus, corner Jeanne Mance and Ste. Catherine Sts.
La Zone Hip Bleue Dry, corner Binary St. and de Maisonneuve Blvd.
Le Monde Pop Le Lait, in front of Complexe Desjardins on Ste. Catherine St.
Le Monde Tad Desjardins/Radio-Canada, on Jeanne Mance St. between de Maisonneuve Blvd. and Ste. Catherine St.
Le Monde Multiculturel Hydro-Québec, on Ste. Catherine St., corner of Clark St.
La Monde Forain, on the northwest esplanade of Place des Arts.
Tente Kamoké Le Lait, on the northeast esplanade of Place des Arts.

Tickets available at Admission, call (514) 790-1245 or visit www.admission.com.
Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W. Call (514) 861-1851.
Place des Arts, (514) 842-2112.
Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd. Call (514) 790-1111.
Monument National, 1182 St. Laurent Blvd. (514) 871-2224.
Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E. Call (514) 844-3500.
Cabaret, 2111 St. Laurent Blvd. Call (514) 845-2014.

INFORMATION

For more on the festival, call (514) 876-8080 or (888) 444-9114, or visit www.francofolies.com

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